1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
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CHAPTER V

BIRTH, CHILDHOOD, AND ADOLESCENCE

842 THE LOVE of children, and the prestige which a man gains as head of a large family, are factors that go far to explain the desire for a numerous progeny. In this not only is he aided by his own sophistication in matters of sex — for in Haitian peasant culture, one encounters no such conventionalized naïveté as the ignorance of physiological paternity found in certain other, non-African societies — but his desire is furthered as well by the absence of contraceptives, and the emphasis laid by Church, State, and African tradition on the desirability of many offspring. Though situations do arise when, because of illicit relations between a man and woman that result in conception, an abortion is held necessary, usually as soon as a woman discovers that she has conceived, she proceeds to take the necessary protective measures. First she goes to the old women of her own family, who give her herbs for the "three baths" she must take on each of the three succeeding days. This accomplished, she next visits a priest or priestess of the *vodun* cult who has the confidence of her family or of her husband's, and procures other herbs also for the purpose of preparing baths, and, in addition, a magic charm to wear about her neck or about her waist. This charm protects both herself and the child in her womb against the evil eye or any

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the phrase: "This is natural." Children are not spaced, for normally a man resumes intercourse with his wife the second or third month after childbirth. Except for the drinking of coconut milk and salt, which is believed to be effective in preventing conception if taken before intercourse, contraceptives are not known to women, which means that pregnancies follow in rapid succession. Families are not too large, however, despite this, those numbering seven or eight children being rare, even in the hills. The reason for this is a high incidence of infant mortality, which is obvious despite the absence of vital statistics. Abortions are usually resorted to by young women, who sustain the operation done by the uncertain skill of an old woman, in the fear that bearing a child will later stand in the way of a desirable legal marriage. Some men, however, take the precaution of placing a grain of native salt on the tongue while having intercourse during an illicit affair, believing that this will be effective in preventing conception.

A childless woman first goes to a *vodun* priest, to have him determine by divination if a co-wife has not invoked magic against her. If her question receives an affirmative answer, she acquires a "counter-charm" to offset the effect of the other woman's magic. Should such a charm be ineffective, she would offer her prayers before the shrines of the saints and make pilgrimages to such sacred places as Saut d'Eau, there phrasing her petition to the Virgin in some manner such as the prayer overheard as a woman lighted a candle and held it in her hand before placing it on a sacred rock:

> *"Vièrge Miracles, Manman, voilà, depuis six ans depuis qui moins marié; moin apé vivre seul avec pauvre malhereux moin-a. Ça fait trois fois moin vini nan pié ou. Pas 'blié mandé moin fait ou, pour charité, moin ou petit pitite. Moin va minnin li ba ou. Moin apé parti, Manman, s' ou' pli, songé ça pitite m' mandé ou.—*

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Virgin of Miracles, Mother, I have been married for six years; I am still living alone with my poor unfortunate one. This is the third time I come to you. For charity's sake, do not forget to send me a child. I have brought this for you. Now I am about to leave [but], Mother, please think of the little one I ask of you."

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

house. A round, polished Indian stone is occasionally used as a *garde habitation*. And old people speak of a very powerful charm known as a *gros arrête* which in former times was placed on the trail to protect entire villages or valleys.

Still another potent defensive charm is the *pouin*, which is the product of ritual magic within the cult temple. A pouin may be an actual bundle containing a formula of special ingredients; more often, it is invisible, consisting of magical forces unleashed into space by the houngan. There are many ceremonies in the hounfor devoted to the projecting of these magical forces. They are called *cérémonie pouin* or *cérémonie magie* and are dramatized by special cult songs and dances. Sometimes the magic ceremony is woven into a more generalized cult ritual. The powers of the pouin are regarded as wider and more potent than those of the arrête. Pouins are said to protect an individual or a group not only against other magic but also against natural phenomena and accident. A pouin may ward off lightning, for example, or protect one from falling trees or from shipwreck or drowning. But it is not solely defensive magic. It may bring success in fishing, or produce a good crop in one's garden, or aid human fertility.

Since the crops and the garden are the substance of life, much attention is given to their protection. An enemy may attack a man or his household through garden magic. He may bury a ouanga in the earth, to bring sickness or ruin. He may poison a tree by performing a special rite at its foot, and its fruits will then carry disease or death to the one who eats them. Or he may make a compact with the earth so that it will dry up and refuse to produce for the one who tills it. Against all these malevolent possibilities, as well as against common thieves, the Haitian peasant has many magical and practical resources. Some people are said to employ zombies as watchmen. These fearsome creatures will capture a trespasser and hold him for the owner of the field.[a] Or perhaps the owner will place special arrêtes in his garden. Occasionally a man will protect his fields by planting *piquettes* in the earth. The *piquette* is a piece of sharpened bamboo or hard wood. Its point is dipped into poison, and it is placed in the ground, sharpened end up. An unwary intruder who steps on a piquette may die of his wound.

To counteract the *maljok*, or evil eye, a man may procure from a bocor a special shirt made of wide strips of red, white, and blue cloth sewed together. This shirt, called a *mayo* or *manyo*, is worn for seven days if the *maljok* is a rather ordinary one. If the evil force is a particularly virulent one, however, the *mayo* will be worn as long as twenty-one

[a] [Simpson, "Haitian Peasant Economy," Journal of Negro History, October, 1940, P. 503. Cf. P. 351, Category 116. -- Analyst]

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

a massacre in the western part of the Dominican Republic which took the lives of an estimated five thousand to fifteen thousand Haitians. The survivors fled homeward, and many were settled in frontier areas by the government. Even so, today there are believed to be some sixty or seventy thousand Haitians still living east of the border. Large numbers of Haitians, particularly men, migrated to Cuba in the years following World War I, in search of better wages in the cane fields. By 1931 there were more than eighty thousand Haitians in that country.[1] But resentment by local Cuban labor and the onset of the depression combined to force the repatriation of great numbers of them. Thirty thousand Haitians came home from Cuba in the years 1936 and 1937 alone.

Solution of Haiti's problem of overpopulation does not seem imminent. The obvious answers would seem to be birth control, emigration, wiser use of natural resources, and industrialization. Since the country is predominantly Catholic, and since much social value is placed on children, birth control seems unlikely. And as health facilities become more widespread and infant mortality drops, the pressure will become more acute. Emigration seems to offer no hope, since neighboring islands and countries on the mainland give no encouragement. The Haitian may yet learn to conserve his land and to get more out of it, to stock his lakes with fish, and to bring more fish in from the sea. But this will not suffice. Nothing is left but industrialization, and that seems to be a thing of the far-distant future.

Nevertheless, the character of Haitian life remains essentially agrarian. The displaced peasant, whether he is now a hotel "houseboy," a taxi driver, or a cane cutter, dreams of returning to the land some day and growing bananas, coffee, and cotton that will make him independent. In far-off places such as Havana and New York, Haitians work and save money with the expectation that one day they will come home, buy fifteen or twenty acres of ground, build a new house, and live out their lives as decently prosperous *habitants*. The traditions of the agricultural society, along with Vodoun, continue to play a significant role in the life of the people.

One such tradition is the institution of the *coumbite*, a loosely knit coöperative work party of neighbors and friends. The word itself probably comes from the Spanish *convide*, or *convite*, meaning "to invite." A member of the group holds a coumbite by notifying his fellow members that on such-and-such a day his fields will require clearing or hoeing. There are several variants of the work gathering. One, called *carré* or *corvée*, meets at irregular intervals and only on special invitation. There are no regular reciprocal obligations in the *corvée;* the workers are

[1] [Simpson, "Haitian Peasant Economy," Journal of Negro History, October, 1940, P. 515. Cf. P. 352, Category 116. --Analyst]